

Accountable TalkSM

Accountable TalkSM is one of nine Principles of Learning--distilled from more than 25 years of research on learning and cognition--describing instructional environments and practices that enable all students to achieve high academic standards through sustained and targeted effort.

Talking with others about ideas and work is fundamental to learning. It gives us the opportunity to organize our thinking into coherent utterances, hear how our thinking sounds out loud, listen to how others respond and, often, hear others add to or expand on our thinking. But not all talk sustains learning. For classroom talk to promote learning it must be accountable to the learning community, to accurate and appropriate knowledge, and to rigorous thinking.

Accountable TalkSM seriously responds to and further develops what others in the group have said. It puts forth and demands knowledge that is accurate and relevant to the issue under discussion. Accountable TalkSM uses evidence appropriate to the discipline (e.g., proofs in mathematics, data from investigations in science, textual references in literature, documentary sources in history) and follows established norms of good reasoning. Accountable TalkSM sharpens students' thinking by reinforcing their ability to use and create knowledge.

There is an extensive research base on classroom discourse which examines the nature of classroom talk and the relationship between talk and learning in school. Researchers and experienced classroom teachers alike know that simply getting students to talk out loud or talk to one another does not necessarily lead to learning. What matters is what students are talking about and how. When students are merely nattering at each other shooting the breeze about various social events -- or if they are simply going through the motions of discussion without really working on the learning problem -- the talk distracts from their learning rather than advancing it.

Accountable TalkSM is not something that springs spontaneously from students' mouths. It takes time and effort to create a classroom environment in which Accountable TalkSM is a valued norm. It requires teachers to guide and scaffold student participation. Teachers create the norms and skills of Accountable TalkSM in their classrooms by modeling appropriate forms of discussion and by questioning, probing, and leading conversations. For example, teachers may press for clarification and explanation, require justifications of proposals and challenges, recognize and challenge misconceptions, demand evidence for claims and arguments, or interpret and "revoice" students' statements. Over time, students can be expected to carry out each of these conversational "moves" themselves in peer discussions. At this stage, when the norms for conversation within the classroom have been established, Accountable TalkSM is jointly constructed by teachers and students working together towards rigorous academic purposes in a thinking curriculum.

Conversations in the classroom can take a wide variety of forms -- whole class discussion, small group work, peer or teacher conferences, or interviews. But regardless of which form is used, talk should be accountable to the learning community, to knowledge and the standards of evidence that are appropriate for the subject, and to generally accepted standards of reasoning. These forms of accountability can be seen in what the students say and in what the teacher says. They are supported by classroom norms and recurring activities as well as by carefully designed tasks.

Because talk is always about something, it doesn't really make sense to focus on talk out of context. In order to recognize and support Accountable TalkSM, it is critical to focus on the activities and tasks that are carried along by the talk. It's impossible to identify "good" or "productive" or "accountable" talk without taking into consideration the goals, topics, and content of the lesson, and the relationship of the learners to each other and to the task at hand. For this reason, in thinking about and promoting Accountable TalkSM, we are always moving from purposes to activities to talk.

The process of socializing intelligence takes place in and through talk. Therefore, all students have a right to engage in Accountable TalkSM, not just the "best and brightest," nor only those who are struggling in school. It is not something that should be limited to special times of the day, or to special groups of students. And, we should expect to find Accountable TalkSM across all grade levels and in all subject areas.

In member districts of the Institute for Learning, educators study the principle of Accountable TalkSM at length and in depth. Looking closely at talk is not merely an abstract or academic exercise. Creating a classroom where students and teachers practice Accountable TalkSM daily, gives educators a greater appreciation for the strengths of all their students, focuses the work on knowledge and ideas, and builds a learning community where students and teachers are working together toward rigorous academic purposes in a thinking curriculum.

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